

In October 1855, at a time when society's views on the nature of Biblical authority and human freedom were evolving and subject to change. Vincent van Gogh, the wildly talented yet tortured artist, completed an oil canvas and titled it *Still Life with Bible*. Looking at it, one observes a table, and on the table an open Bible. To the right of God's Word is a candle, burned out, standing in its holder. In the foreground the artist has painted a small yellow book. The print on the binding is still legible – it is Emile Zola's *The Joy of Life*.

By placing a burned-out candle beside the Bible and by putting both in the background, van Gogh is telling us that the time for walking through this world by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, who shines down upon God's Word, is past. Biblical authority no longer holds sway. People are guided by different, if not lesser lights. The pursuit is no longer God's way but ways that bring us joy through our own pursuits.

Peter already had "painted" that picture centuries before. Peter lived in a day not unlike our own where the Word of God and its light appears to be in danger of being snuffed out in many circles and even within the church community. It is easy to follow a different path that is easier and more promising in the moment.

Peter warns us about false teachers who will always be among us and then gives us three lessons to learn about how we might avoid falling prey to false teaching. This is timely and a much needed lesson. The next sermon in the series will cover a more detailed look at exactly how to spot a false teacher. Today we are going to look at how to keep from failing by observing the failure of others.

But there were also false prophets in Israel, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will cleverly teach destructive heresies and even deny the Master who bought them. In this way, they will bring sudden destruction on themselves. ² Many will follow their evil teaching and shameful immorality. And because of these teachers, the way of truth will be slandered. ³ In their greed they will make up clever lies to get hold of your money. But God condemned them long ago, and their destruction will not be delayed.

⁴ For God did not spare even the angels who sinned. He threw them into hell, in gloomy pits of darkness, where they are being held until the Day of Judgment. ⁵ And God did not spare the ancient world—except for Noah and the seven others in his family. Noah warned the world of God's righteous judgment. So God protected Noah when he destroyed the world of ungodly people with a vast flood. ⁶ Later, God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and turned them into heaps of ashes. He made them an example of what will happen to ungodly people. ⁷ But God also rescued Lot out of Sodom because he was a righteous man who was sick of the shameful immorality of the wicked people around him. ⁸ Yes, Lot was a righteous man who was tormented in his soul by the wickedness he saw and heard day after day. ⁹ So you see, the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from their trials, even while keeping the wicked under punishment until the day of final judgment. ¹⁰ He is especially hard on those who follow their own twisted sexual desire, and who despise authority. 2 Peter 2:1-10a

Well this is a heavy word from Peter but remember he wasn't wasting his breath as he faced his own death. He was zealous for the church and wanted them to avoid false teaching and to be everything God wanted them to be. He also wanted them to finish well.

He does write some of the straightest talk you will find in the New Testament. Peter clearly gives us three historic examples of not finishing well. They are powerful and dramatic. They are not stories for the faint of heart. They are not politically correct stories. They confront and challenge many of the new norms in our own society.

1. Lessons from some angels: Autonomy is overrated.

Before we go any further let me define the word autonomy: It is the right or independence of self-government. It is independence. While some places and situations this might seem like a good thing God is not looking for Christian libertarians.

For God did not spare even the angels who sinned. He threw them into hell, in gloomy pits of darkness, where they are being held until the day of judgment. 2 Peter 2:4 NLT

People really wrestle with submitting to authority and especially to God's authority. Apparently some angels thought they knew more than God and decided to declare their autonomy. It didn't work out so well and in fact it never does. This is a reference to Satan's exit from heaven. You can read more about it in Isaiah.

It is a startling thing to be reminded that the road to hell is paved with some who knew what it was to live first hand in the presence of God. The message here is incredibly clear. We should learn just how far our declarations of autonomy can take us away from God. And we should take note that His righteous judgment will fall on those who declare their independence.

When tempted to follow today's numerous false teachers who have abandoned belief in a fixed and final judgment because of sensuality and greed, come and stand before the pictures painted by Peter in this gallery of those who didn't finish well.

Be reminded again and again to put away all thoughts of sinfulness and selfish ways. Submit daily to the authority of Jesus in your life. Celebrate His power to keep you and deliver you not the devils power to still control you after you are "saved."

There is a scripture I remember from my youth that started out in the KJV with these words: "Come out from among them and be ye separate . . ." Here it is from the Message Bible and it is a clear call to submission to God's authority.

Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark? Does Christ go strolling with the Devil? Do trust and mistrust hold hands? Who would think of setting up pagan idols in God's Holy Temple? But that is exactly what we are, each of us a temple in whom God lives. God himself put it this way:

“I’ll live in them, move into them; I’ll be their God and they’ll be my people. So leave the corruption and compromise; leave it for good,” says God. “Don’t link up with those who will pollute you. I want you all for myself. I’ll be a Father to you; you’ll be sons and daughters to me.” The Word of the Master, God. 2 Corinthians 6:17 The Message

True Biblical worship so satisfies our total personality that we don’t have to shop around for man-made substitutes. William Temple made this clear in his masterful definition of worship: “For worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose—and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.”

2. Lessons from the ancient world: Apostasy out of control

So let’s first of all define apostasy: is the formal disaffiliation from or abandonment or renunciation of a religion by a person. One who commits apostasy is known as an **apostate**.

Apostasy or the rejection of God is very common today as it has been since the beginning of time. There is just something in the hearts of non-surrendered human beings that makes it nearly impossible to take God all that seriously. Sometimes it is because of the witness or lack thereof of His followers. But that’s another sermon for another day.

God always judges people who reject Him. It may not be immediate but it is coming. Peter here uses a reference to the ancient world of the Old Testament and the beginning of recorded time found in Genesis.

⁵ And God did not spare the ancient world—except for Noah and the seven others in his family. Noah warned the world of God’s righteous judgment. So God protected Noah when he destroyed the world of ungodly people with a vast flood. 2 Peter 2:5 NLT

He is concerned that his repentant and believing Christ following readers might forget, become discouraged and slip back into the damning lie of false teachers that God never punishes sin. He is concerned that we don’t forget that God promised to return and that He is going to keep that promise.

Matthew stated this warning from Jesus Himself:

“When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah’s day. ³⁸ In those days before the flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. ³⁹ People didn’t realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes.” Matthew 24:37-39 NLT

Learn from the people of Noah's day. It doesn't pay to reject God's message and think that you know more than God. That you are above needing His salvation.

"It's crucial that we keep a firm grip on what we've heard so that we don't drift off. If the old message delivered by the angels was valid and nobody got away with anything, do you think we can risk neglecting this latest message, this magnificent salvation?" Hebrews 2:1-2 The Message

Let me go back 100 years and quote A. W. Tozer.

"We have gotten accustomed to the blurred puffs of gray fog that pass for doctrine in churches and expect nothing better. From some previously unimpeachable sources are now coming vague statements consisting of a milky admixture of Scripture, science, and human sentiment that is true to none of its ingredients because each one works to cancel the others out. Little by little Christians these days are being brainwashed. One evidence is that increasing numbers of them are becoming ashamed to be found unequivocally on the side of truth. They say they believe, but their beliefs have been so diluted as to be impossible of clear definition. Moral power has always accompanied definite beliefs. Great saints have always been dogmatic. We need a return to a gentle dogmatism that smiles while it stands stubborn and firm on the Word of God that lives and abides forever."

It is very painful to stand by and watch men and women of today's generation think that they have discovered some great truth that is going to make us more palatable to the world around us. Somehow by rejecting the truths of the Bible we will become better able to reach our generation for Christ. It is the biggest crock of hogwash I've ever heard. And people have been doing it for generations. It's just tough to watch when it is in your own denomination and in our Universities and seminary.

3. Lessons from the ashes: Abomination is offensive

Do I really need to define abomination? I guess I better or some of you will only think of the abominable snowman.

Abomination: a vile, shameful, or detestable action, condition, habit

Abomination is offensive to God. Always has been and always will be. This is where you have to really believe the Bible to be the Word of God or you will disagree with things I am about to say.

Later, God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and turned them into heaps of ashes. He made them an example of what will happen to ungodly people.⁷ But God also rescued Lot out of Sodom because he was a righteous man who was sick of the shameful immorality of the wicked people around him.⁸ Yes, Lot was a righteous man who was tormented in his soul by the wickedness he saw and heard day after day.⁹ So you see, the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from their trials, even while keeping the wicked under punishment until the day of final judgment.¹⁰ He is especially hard on those who follow their own twisted sexual desire, and who despise authority 2 Peter 2:6-10a NLT

Peter is writing fast and furious I believe. On the night that the angelic visitors came to warn Lot of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah some terrible things happened that were truly abominable. You can read the whole account in Genesis 18 and 19. Let me sum it up for you.

God has a conversation with Abraham and promised to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In God's words, *"I have heard a great outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah, because their sin is so flagrant. ²¹ I am going down to see if their actions are as wicked as I have heard. If not, I want to know."* Genesis 18:20-21 NLT

Abraham proceeds to bargain with God and tries to solicit a promise not to destroy it if at least fifty righteous people can be found. The number gets all the way down to ten and God promises. Lot and his family are the only apparent righteous people there and so two angels appearing as men visit Lot. They are there to warn him about the impending destruction. And here is where you get a picture of abomination at its worst. Lot welcomes them to stay with him but they reply:

"We'll just spend the night out here in the city square."

³ *But Lot insisted, so at last they went home with him. Lot prepared a feast for them, complete with fresh bread made without yeast, and they ate. ⁴ But before they retired for the night, all the men of Sodom, young and old, came from all over the city and surrounded the house. ⁵ They shouted to Lot, "Where are the men who came to spend the night with you? Bring them out to us so we can have sex with them!"* Genesis 19:3-5 NLT

Do you feel the dirtiness of that moment? Do you feel the filth of these cities? What was their great abomination? Their sins were many but they can be summed up with this phrase. They were self-indulgent. This will always get us in trouble. I know that Sodom is known for the homosexual activity that was evidently a big part of its culture but even that behavior can be seen as having its roots in self-indulgence. Again you will not accept this if you don't accept the Bible as God's Word and a final authority on our lives. Self-indulgence is way bigger than just one sin.

I want you to really think about this for a moment. What areas of your life are you self-indulgent in? What areas of self-gratification do you excuse for one reason or another? Listen this can be any area of your life. What we learn from this is that simply put selfish indulgent behavior that goes against everything God stands for is offensive to God and will be punished.

Peter is adamant about it and calls for us to stay on the right course and not be drawn away by our personal lusts and passions. This includes everything from food to sex.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodom_and_Gomorrah Look at Biblical references under this link.

And don't forget Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring towns, which were filled with immorality and every kind of sexual perversion. Those cities were destroyed by fire and serve as a warning of the eternal fire of God's judgment. Jude v.7 NLT

¹⁰ *He is especially hard on those who follow their own twisted sexual desire, and who despise authority.*

You want to know more about how God feels about this I encourage you to read Romans 1.

But God shows His anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

¹⁹ They know the truth about God because He has made it obvious to them. ²⁰ For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

²¹ Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship Him as God or even give Him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. ²² Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. ²³ And instead of worshipping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. ²⁵ They traded the Truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator Himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. ²⁶ That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. ²⁷ And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved.

²⁸ Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, He abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. ²⁹ Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. ³⁰ They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. ³¹ They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. ³² They know God's justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too. Romans 1:18-32 NLT

Regardless of how God-rejecting the sin, you and I must be willing and ready to love the sinner. Never do you get to be hateful or unkind to people that are not following Christ. Never!

When we begin to think that somehow we are above and beyond consequences for our actions and behaviors, and that God is only love and that nothing bad will ever happen to us, we are in danger not only of self-deception but of becoming recipients of God's righteous wrath.

4. Lesson from the Almighty: God always has a way for those willing to take it.

⁹ So you see, the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from their trials, even while keeping the wicked under punishment until the day of final judgment. 2 Peter 2:9 NLT

This is the hopeful part of this section of scripture. Amidst Peter's dire and straight forward warning about not doing what God expects us to do we find antidotal stories of God's grace and mercy. God always has had a plan to rescue man from his sins and sinful ways. The saddest story of the Bible is that most people will not take it.

Like the lessons we have seen today. Maybe they value their autonomy or independence too much or maybe they are slaves to fleshly desires and habits. Regardless of the issue we may wrestle with, God always has a way out if we will just take it.

It is usually a very narrow road and the Bible says that few will find it. That means even in the context of the church world you will find people looking for easy ways out. You will find false teachers who tell people what they want to hear instead of insisting on God's standard of holy living.

Noah was protected but offered that same protection to others by preaching to his neighbors. I don't know if he actually preached but I am sure he answered a lot of questions over the years it took him to build the ark. He was the only faithful and righteous man on the earth!

⁶ And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him.

⁷ It was by faith that Noah built a large boat to save his family from the flood. He obeyed God, who warned him about things that had never happened before. By his faith Noah condemned the rest of the world, and he received the righteousness that comes by faith.

⁸ It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going Hebrews 11:6-8 NLT

Lot was rescued because he was a righteous man.

It is a crazy story and one might wonder why Lot would choose to live in Sodom but he was there and the important thing to know is that he was faithful to God although the scripture says he lived with a vexed soul over the sin around him.

God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and turned them into heaps of ashes. He made them an example of what will happen to ungodly people. ⁷ But God also rescued Lot out of Sodom because he was a righteous man who was sick of the shameful immorality of the wicked people around him. 2 Peter 2:6-7 NLT

The big idea here is to live like God wants you to live. Are you tired of me saying it yet? I'm tired of saying it.

It's simple really:

*“You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.”^[e]
³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[f] ⁴⁰ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:37-40 NLT*

Theologian Helmut Thielicke said, "A salty pagan, full of the juices of life, is a hundred times dearer to God, and also far more attractive to men, than a scribe who knows his Bible...in whom none of this results in repentance, action, and above all, death of the self. A terrible curse hangs over the know-it-all who does nothing."